

NEWS / AGRICULTURE

Let them eat the city, say the urban farmers of Paris

From underground former car-parks to the rooftops of the famous skyline, an agricultural revolution is taking place.

by **Helen Massy-Beresford**

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The rooftop farm on top of the Opera Bastille produces fruits and hops, tomatoes, cucumbers, salad leaves, edible flowers and more [Topager]

Paris, France - Parisian mushrooms are reclaiming their space in the dark spaces under the City of Light.

"When cars arrived in Paris in the 1930s they pushed out "champignons de Paris" (known in English as button mushrooms)," explains Jean-Noel Gertz, CEO of Cycloponics, the start-up that has transformed an abandoned car park into La Caverne, an organic underground urban farm.

Huge quantities of button mushrooms used to be grown using the manure of the city's horses, so the rise of the car led to an abrupt drop in production. But things have now come full circle.

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"Now, with car use declining, Paris mushrooms are pushing out cars," says Gertz, who is testing the growing of the variety at La Caverne's existing site below the concrete near Porte de La Chapelle, with plans to launch larger-scale production in a new underground site in the city's 19th arrondissement next March.

At La Caverne's existing site, under a high-rise neighbourhood in the north of Europe's most densely populated city, shiitake and oyster mushrooms sprout on rows of specially treated bales, while water trickles through huge trays of endives growing in the dark.

The produce, 100kg-200kg of mushrooms per day, is delivered by bicycle to grocery shops and restaurants.

La Caverne is part of the Parisculteurs project which city authorities launched in 2016, offering would-be city farmers abandoned urban spaces to cultivate.

In spring 2020 in the project's biggest milestone to date, a 14,000sq-metre (150,695sq-foot) rooftop urban farm - the world's largest - is due to open at the newly redeveloped Paris Expo Porte de Versailles exhibition centre, cultivating more than 30 varieties of vegetables and fruits and including allotments for local residents.

Parisculteurs' original aim was to turn 100 hectares (247 acres) green by 2020, in a bid to help cut emissions, slow the decline in biodiversity, give city dwellers access to nature and create local jobs and social links.

Those targets have already been achieved, says Penelope Komites, deputy mayor of Paris in charge of green spaces, biodiversity and urban agriculture, with more than 116 hectares (287 acres) of walls and rooftops "greened".

"When the projects from the first three seasons of Parisculteurs are at full production, they will be producing 1,650 tonnes of fruit, vegetables, mushrooms and herbs, seven tonnes of fish, 1.2 million cut flowers and 1.3 million plants per year - as well as honey, saffron, edible flowers, hops and spirulina, and 250 jobs will have been created," Komites says.

Parisculteurs has come at a time when interest among French consumers in local products is also growing.

"We're seeing a boom in organic food shops in France, particularly in Paris," says Gertz. "In Paris, 75 percent of people eat organic."



Brewery La Parisienne, which started life in the city before moving to bigger premises in the nearby suburb of Pantin, is also taking part in Parisculteurs, growing its own hops at three sites in the city, with another planned for 2022.

"We wanted to be as sustainable as possible, and urban agriculture is just a part of that," says communications manager Lucas Lebrun. "The idea is to brew the most local beer possible and offer Parisians a truly Parisian beer."

La Parisienne harvested around 25kg (55lbs) of city hops this year, using them to brew Intramuros, a light seasonal beer designed to be accessible and to appeal not just to craft beer aficionados. It sold out.

An important part of the project is getting local residents as well as fans of La Parisienne involved in harvesting the hops, Lebrun says.

That collaborative approach is something BienElevees also wanted to capitalise on, explains Amela du Bessey, one of four sisters behind the saffron-growing start-up, which has just received the top ISO certification for its 2019 saffron.

"We're very proud of that quality. But it's the human aspect that is extraordinary," du Bessey says: around 500 people visited during this year's three-week harvest, taking part in workshops and helping with the picking and planting. "It brings people together - and that's great."

The Parisculteurs project provided the ideal opportunity for the sisters to try growing saffron, the world's most expensive spice, close to Paris' high-end food shops and Michelin-starred restaurants.

"Saffron is very happy in city conditions and the flowers have to be harvested within a day so there is no risk from air pollution," du Bessey says.

Their Parisculteurs-backed plantation is on the roof of a Monoprix supermarket in the south of the city, and there are four other Paris sites, including their first, on the roof of the Institut du Monde Arabe (Arab World Institute), in a nod to saffron's Middle Eastern origins.

Pascal Mayol, an expert ecologist at the Nicolas Hulot Foundation, an environmental NGO, and a member of the CESE, an assembly that advises the government on social, environmental and economic matters, also believes that the education and social links provided by urban

agriculture may be as important as the production itself.

Re-building social links among isolated city dwellers, re-educating them on how food is grown and increasing cities' food autonomy will be vital in the face of a food production system at risk from the decline of fossil fuels in the coming decades, he says.

"Big cities risk interruptions to their food supply as early as 2050," says Mayol. "We won't be able to feed entire cities with urban agriculture - in a city like Paris, it could produce a maximum of 10 percent of what is needed. But it allows us to reconnect to the agricultural world and realise that a carrot doesn't grow in a supermarket, it grows in a field and for that to happen we need to preserve the land around cities that is used for agriculture."

Fostering a sense of community and cooperation will also help people to navigate the shift from abundance to scarcity, he believes.


In the shorter-term, urban agriculture projects should also help limit rising temperatures, a growing concern for Paris city authorities after the city recorded an all-time high of 42.6 degrees Celsius (109F) during a July 2019 heatwave.

"We believe that cities are going to become literally uninhabitable by the end of the century," Mayol says. "Temperatures in a city like Paris could reach 50 degrees, and that's not compatible with life as it's organised today. Greening can air-condition cities naturally."

Urban agriculture specialist Topager, the start-up behind multiple urban agriculture projects including a rooftop urban farm growing fruits and hops, tomatoes, cucumbers, salad leaves, edible flowers and more on top of the Bastille opera house also sees urban agriculture as a tool for introducing ecological awareness to city dwellers.

"We think ecology is more efficient with a carrot than a stick, and instead of endless rules, urban agriculture projects that create a desire to favour local production will push people to change their behaviour," says Frederic Madre, co-founder of Topager. "It's utopian to think we will feed cities entirely with local production but it's good to create better links between people and for city dwellers to be better connected with nature."

Parisculteurs is just part of an ongoing drive to make the French capital greener, with more underused spaces set to be transformed into gardens, farms and vineyards as part of broader infrastructure projects in the coming years.



"I think Parisculteurs has demonstrated that cities can have a role as production sites that complement those in rural and peri-urban areas," Komites says. "We are not aiming to be self-sufficient, but we want to raise awareness among Parisians that we need to eat local and seasonal products."

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